

# Dennis Rader

**Dennis Lynn Rader** (born March 9, 1945) is an American **serial killer** who murdered ten people in **Sedgwick County, Kansas**, between 1974 and 1991.

He is also known as the **BTK Killer** or the **BTK Strangler**. “BTK” stands for “Bind, Torture, Kill”, which was his infamous signature. He sent letters describing the details of the killings to police and local news outlets during the interval when the murders happened.

After a hiatus in the 1990s to the early 2000s, Rader resumed sending letters in 2004, leading to his 2005 arrest and subsequent guilty plea. He is currently serving 10 consecutive life sentences at **El Dorado Correctional Facility** in Kansas.

terminated Rader’s employment for failure to report to work or to call in. He had been arrested for the murders five days earlier.<sup>[13]</sup>

Rader was a member of Christ Lutheran Church and had been elected president of the church council.<sup>[6][14]</sup> He was also a **Cub Scout** leader.<sup>[6]</sup> On July 26, 2005, after Rader’s arrest, **Sedgwick County** District Judge Eric Yost waived the 60-day waiting period and granted an immediate divorce for his wife, agreeing that her **mental health** was in danger. Rader did not contest the divorce, and the 34-year marriage was ended. Paula Rader said in her divorce petition that her mental and physical condition was adversely affected by the marriage.<sup>[7][15]</sup>

## 1 Early life and career

Dennis Rader is the oldest of four sons, born to Dorothea Mae Rader (née Cook) and William Elvin Rader.<sup>[1]</sup> Though born in **Pittsburg, Kansas**, he grew up in Wichita. According to many reports, including his confessions, as a child he tortured animals.<sup>[2]</sup> He also had a **sexual fetish** for women’s underwear and stole underpants from his victims and wore them himself.<sup>[3]</sup>

Rader spent 1966–1970 in the **United States Air Force**.<sup>[3]</sup> Upon discharge, he moved to **Park City**. He worked in the meat department of Leekers IGA supermarket in Park City with his mother, a **bookkeeper** for the store.<sup>[4]</sup>

Rader attended **Butler County Community College** in **El Dorado**, earning an associate degree in electronics in 1973.<sup>[5]</sup> He then enrolled at **Wichita State University** and graduated in 1979 with a **bachelor’s** in administration of justice. He married Paula Dietz on May 22, 1971, and they had two children.<sup>[6][7]</sup>

Rader worked as an assembler for the **Coleman Company**, an outdoor supply company; then, during 1974–1988, he worked at the Wichita-based office of **ADT Security Services**, a home security company. He installed **security alarms** as a part of his job; many of his clients booked the company to stop BTK from entering their homes, unaware that BTK was installing them.<sup>[6][8]</sup> Rader was a **census** field operations supervisor for the Wichita area in 1989, before the 1990 federal census.<sup>[9]</sup> He became a dogcatcher and compliance officer in **Park City**.<sup>[6][10][11]</sup> In this position, neighbors recalled him as being sometimes overzealous and extremely strict; one neighbor complained he **euthanized** her dog for no reason.<sup>[12]</sup> On March 2, 2005, the Park City council

## 2 Crimes

### 2.1 Victims

All of Rader’s known crimes occurred in Kansas. He killed ten people in total and collected items from each murder scene. He also intended to kill others, notably Anna Williams, 63, who in 1979 escaped death by returning home much later than he expected. Rader explained during his confession that he became obsessed with Williams and was “absolutely livid” when she evaded him. Rader spent hours waiting in her home but became impatient and left when she did not return home from visiting friends.<sup>[16]</sup> Two of the women Rader had **stalked** in the 1980s and one he had stalked in the mid-1990s filed **restraining orders** against him; one of them also moved away.<sup>[17]</sup>

Rader admitted in his interrogation that he had been planning to kill again. He had set a date, October 2004, and was stalking his intended victim.<sup>[17]</sup>

With the exception of Hedge and Davis, all victims’ bodies were found on the date of death at the location of death. Hedge was found eight days later on May 5, 1985 at East 53rd Street North between North Webb Road and North Greenwich Road in Wichita. Davis was found 13 days later on February 1, 1991 at West 117th Street North and North Meridian Street in Sedgwick.

### 2.2 Case history

Rader was particularly known for sending taunting letters to police and newspapers.<sup>[18][19][20]</sup> He authored many

communications from 1974 to 1979. The first was a letter that had been stashed inside an engineering book in the **Wichita Public Library** in October 1974 that described, in detail, the killing of the Otero family in January of that year.<sup>[9]</sup> In early 1978, he sent another letter to television station **KAKE** in Wichita, claiming responsibility for the murders of the Oteros, Shirley Vian, Nancy Fox, and Kathryn Bright.<sup>[9]</sup> He suggested many possible names for himself, including the one that stuck: BTK. He demanded media attention in this second letter, and it was finally announced that Wichita did indeed have a serial killer at large. A poem was enclosed titled “Oh! Death to Nancy”, a botched version of the lyrics to the American folk song “O Death”.<sup>[21][22]</sup>

In 1988, after the murders of three members of the Fager family in Wichita, a letter was received from someone claiming to be the BTK killer where he denied being the perpetrator of this crime. He credited the killer having done “admirable work”. It was not proven until 2005 that this letter was in fact written by Rader, and he is not considered by police to have committed this crime.<sup>[22]</sup>

By 2004, the investigation of the BTK Killer was cold. Then, Rader began a series of 11 communications to the local media that led directly to his arrest in February 2005. In March 2004, *The Wichita Eagle* received a letter from someone using the return address **Bill Thomas Killman**. The author of the letter claimed that he had murdered Vicki Wegerle on September 16, 1986, and enclosed photographs of the crime scene and a photocopy of her driver’s license, which had been stolen at the time of the crime.<sup>[23]</sup> Before this, it was not definitively established that Wegerle was killed by BTK.<sup>[23]</sup> **DNA** collected from under Wegerle’s fingernails provided police with previously unknown evidence. They then began **DNA testing** hundreds of men in an effort to find the serial killer.<sup>[24]</sup> All together, over 1300 DNA samples were taken and later destroyed by court order.<sup>[25]</sup>

In May 2004, a letter with chapter headings for the “BTK Story”, fake IDs and a word puzzle were received by television station KAKE, Wichita, Kansas.<sup>[4]</sup> On June 9, 2004, a package was found taped to a stop sign at the corner of First and Kansas in Wichita. It had graphic descriptions of the Otero murders and a sketch labeled “The Sexual Thrill Is My Bill”.<sup>[26]</sup> Also enclosed was a chapter list for a proposed book titled *The BTK Story*, which mimicked a story written in 1999 by **Court TV** crime writer **David Lohr**. Chapter One was titled “A Serial Killer Is Born”. In July, a package was dropped into the return slot at the downtown public library containing more bizarre material, including the claim that he was responsible for the death of 19-year-old Jake Allen in **Argonia, Kansas** earlier that month. This claim was false and the death was ruled a suicide.<sup>[27]</sup> In October 2004, a manila envelope was dropped into a **UPS** box in Wichita. It had many cards with images of terror and bondage of children pasted on them, a poem threatening the life of lead investigator Lt. Ken Landwehr and a false autobiography

with many details about Rader’s life. These details were later released to the public.

In December 2004, Wichita police received another package from the BTK killer.<sup>[28]</sup> This time, the package was found in Wichita’s Murdock Park. It had the driver’s license of Nancy Fox, which was noted as stolen from the crime scene, as well as a doll that was symbolically bound at the hands and feet and had a plastic bag tied over its head.<sup>[27]</sup> In January 2005, Rader attempted to leave a cereal box in the bed of a pickup truck at a **Home Depot** in Wichita, but the box was discarded by the truck’s owner. It was later retrieved from the trash after Rader asked what had become of it in a later message. Surveillance tape of the parking lot from that date revealed a distant figure driving a black **Jeep Cherokee** leaving the box in the pickup. In February, more postcards were sent to KAKE, and another cereal box left at a rural location was found to contain another bound doll, apparently meant to symbolize the murder of 11-year-old Josephine Otero.

In his letters to police, Rader asked if his writings, if put on a **floppy disk**, could be traced or not. The police answered his question in a newspaper ad posted in the *Wichita Eagle* saying it would be safe to use the disk. On February 16, 2005, Rader sent a purple 1.44-Megabyte Memorex floppy disk to **Fox TV** affiliate **KSAS-TV** in Wichita.<sup>[29][30]</sup> Also enclosed were a letter, a gold-colored necklace with a large medallion, and a photocopy of the cover of a 1989 novel about a serial killer (*Rules of Prey*).<sup>[30]</sup> Police found **metadata** embedded in a **deleted Microsoft Word** document that was, unbeknownst to Rader, on the floppy disk.<sup>[31]</sup> The metadata contained “**Christ Lutheran Church**”, and the document was marked as last modified by “Dennis”.<sup>[32]</sup> An internet search determined that a “Dennis Rader” was president of the church council.<sup>[29]</sup> From the Home Depot incident, the police also knew BTK owned a black Jeep Cherokee. When investigators drove by Rader’s house, they noticed a black Jeep Cherokee parked outside.<sup>[33]</sup>

The police had strong **circumstantial evidence** against Rader, but they needed more direct evidence to detain him.<sup>[34]</sup> They obtained a warrant to test the DNA of a **pap smear** Rader’s daughter had taken at the **Kansas State University** medical clinic when she was a student. The DNA of the pap smear was processed by the **Kansas Bureau of Investigation** at their lab in Topeka and demonstrated a familial match to the DNA of the sample taken from victim Vicki Wegerle’s fingernails. This indicated that the killer was closely related to Rader’s daughter, and was the evidence the police needed to make an arrest.<sup>[35]</sup>

### 3 Arrest

Rader was stopped while driving near his home in Park City and taken into custody shortly after noon on February 25, 2005.<sup>[36]</sup> Once in handcuffs, Rader was asked by

an officer, “Mr. Rader, do you know why you're going downtown?” to which he replied, “Oh, I have suspicions why.”<sup>[37][38]</sup> Right after his arrest, law enforcement officials, including a Wichita Police bomb unit truck, two SWAT trucks, and KBI, FBI, and ATF agents, converged on Rader's residence near the intersection of I-135 and 61st Street North.<sup>[38]</sup> Police searched Rader's home and vehicle, collecting evidence, including computer equipment, a pair of black pantyhose retrieved from a shed, and a cylindrical container. The church he attended, his office at City Hall, and the main branch of the Park City library were also searched. Officers were seen removing a computer from his City Hall office, but it is unclear if any evidence was found at these locations. At a press conference the next morning, Wichita Police Chief Norman Williams announced, “the bottom line: BTK is arrested”.<sup>[39][40]</sup>

## 4 Legal proceedings

On February 28, 2005, Rader was charged with 10 counts of first degree murder.<sup>[41]</sup> The Sunday after his arrest, the *Associated Press* cited an anonymous source alleging that Rader had confessed to other murders in addition to the ones to which he was connected.<sup>[42]</sup> When asked about the reported confessions, Sedgwick County District Attorney Nola Foulston said, “Your information is patently false,” but refused to say whether Rader made any confessions or if investigators were looking into Rader's possible involvement in more unsolved killings.<sup>[43]</sup> On March 5, news sources claimed to have verified by multiple sources that Rader had confessed to the 10 murders he was charged with, but no other ones.<sup>[44]</sup>

He made his first court appearance by video conference on March 1, 2005, from jail. District Judge Greg Waller Tuesday set his bail at US\$10 million and appointed a public defender to represent him at a preliminary hearing on March 15.<sup>[45]</sup> On May 3, Waller entered “not guilty” pleas to the 10 charges on Rader's behalf, as Rader did not speak at his arraignment.<sup>[46]</sup> On June 27, the scheduled trial date, Rader changed his plea to “guilty”. He described the murders in detail and made no apologies.<sup>[47][48][49]</sup>

He faced sentencing on August 18, 2005. Victims' families made statements and were followed by Rader, who apologized for his crimes in a rambling, bizarre 30-minute monologue that District Attorney Nola Foulston likened to an *Academy Awards* acceptance speech.<sup>[50]</sup> He was sentenced to serve 10 consecutive life sentences, one life sentence per murder victim. In total, Rader would be eligible for parole after 175 years of imprisonment, in 2180.<sup>[51]</sup> Because Kansas had no death penalty at the time the murders were committed, life imprisonment was the maximum penalty allowed by law.<sup>[50]</sup>

On August 19, Rader was moved from the Sedgwick

County Jail to the El Dorado Correctional Facility, a Kansas state prison, to begin serving his consecutive life sentences as Kansas Department of Corrections #0083707. His earliest possible release date is February 26, 2180.<sup>[52]</sup> According to witnesses, Rader talked about innocuous topics such as the weather during the 40-minute drive from Wichita to El Dorado, but began to cry when the victims' families' statements from the court proceedings came on the radio. Rader is now being held in the EDCF “Special Management” unit, also known as solitary confinement, for “the inmate's own protection”. This is a designation he will most likely retain for the remainder of his incarceration. He is confined to his cell for 23 hours a day with the exception of voluntary solo one-hour exercise yard time and access to the shower three times a week.<sup>[53]</sup> Beginning April 23, 2006, Rader reached “Incentive Level Two” and has been allowed to purchase and watch television, purchase and listen to the radio, receive and read magazines, and receive other privileges for good behavior. The victims' families disagreed with this decision. According to Rader's record in the Kansas Department of Corrections database, he had a *Class Two* disciplinary report concerning “mail” on April 10, 2006.<sup>[52]</sup>

### 4.1 Further investigations

Following Rader's arrest, police in Wichita, Park City and several surrounding cities looked into unsolved cases with the cooperation of the state police and the FBI. They particularly focused on cases after 1994, when the death penalty was reinstated in Kansas. Police in surrounding states such as Nebraska, Missouri, Colorado, Oklahoma and Texas also investigated cold cases that fit Rader's pattern to some extent. The FBI, Civil Air Patrol<sup>[54]</sup> and local jurisdictions at Rader's former duty stations checked into unsolved cases during Rader's time in the service.

After exhaustive investigations, none of these agencies discovered any further murders attributable to Rader, confirming early suspicions that Rader would have taken credit for any additional murders that he had committed. The 10 known murders are now believed to be the only murders that Rader is actually responsible for, although Wichita police are fairly certain that Rader stalked and researched a number of other potential future victims. This includes one person who was saved when Rader called off his planned attack upon his arrival near the target's home due to the presence of construction and road crews near her home. In his police interview, Rader stated that “there are a lot of lucky people,” meaning that he had thought about and developed various levels of murder plans for other victims.<sup>[55]</sup>

## 4.2 Evaluation by Robert Mendoza

Massachusetts psychologist Robert Mendoza was hired by Rader's court-appointed public defenders to conduct a psychological evaluation for Rader and determine if an insanity-based defense might be viable. He conducted an interview after Rader pleaded guilty on June 27. NBC claimed Rader knew the interview might be on TV, but this was false according to the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Department. Rader mentioned the interview during his sentencing statement. On October 25, 2005, the Kansas attorney general filed a petition to sue Mendoza and Tali Waters, co-owners of Cambridge Forensic Consultants, LLC, for breach of contract, claiming that they intended to benefit financially from the use of information obtained through involvement in Rader's defense. On May 10, 2007, Mendoza settled the case for US\$30,000 with no admission of wrongdoing.<sup>[56]</sup>

## 5 In media

### 5.1 Literature

- The writer Stephen King says his novella *A Good Marriage*, and the film based on it, was inspired by the BTK killer.<sup>[57]</sup>
- The novelist Thomas Harris has said that the character of Francis Dolarhyde from the novel *Red Dragon* is partially based on Rader. Similarities can be seen in the acts of necrophilia performed on some victims and the allusions in letters to the police of an abusive childhood.<sup>[58]</sup>

### 5.2 Music

- Aggrotech band Suicide Commando released an album titled *Bind, Torture, Kill* in 2006. The album features songs titled "Bind, Torture, Kill" and "Rader".
- Brutal death metal band Suffocation released a track titled "Bind, Torture, Kill" on their 2006 self-titled album *Suffocation*, containing lyrics written from the point of view of Dennis Rader about his motivations for and feelings about committing murder. This track was featured in a 2007 promotional video by The History Channel for their documentary, *The Dark Ages*.<sup>[59]</sup>
- Progressive rock musician Steven Wilson's track "Raider II" on his 2011 album *Grace for Drowning* is based on the murders committed by Rader.<sup>[60]</sup>
- Doom metal band Church of Misery, released a track in 2013 called "B.T.K." about Rader on their album, *Thy Kingdom Scum*.<sup>[61]</sup>

- Thrash metal band Exodus, released a track on their 2014 album, *Blood In, Blood Out* called "BTK" which is based on the murders performed by Rader. The track also featured Testament vocalist Chuck Billy.<sup>[62]</sup>

### 5.3 Films

- *The Hunt for the BTK Killer (2005)* at the Internet Movie Database
- *B.T.K. Killer (2005)* at the Internet Movie Database
- *B.T.K. (2008)* at the Internet Movie Database
- *Feast of the Assumption: BTK and the Otero Family Murders (2010)* at the Internet Movie Database

### 5.4 Television

- *Who the (Bleep)...? episode "Horrible Bosses" (2013)* at the Internet Movie Database

## 6 See also

- *I Survived BTK*
- Macdonald triad

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## 8 Further reading

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## 9 External links

- B.T.K. – The Worlds Most Elusive Serial Killer
- Sedgwick County 18th Judicial District collection of legal documents on the Rader case
- *The Wichita Eagle* Collection of articles and videos about BTK
- KAKE Collection of articles and videos on BTK
- Dennis Rader’s listing on the Kansas Department of Corrections *Kansas Adult Supervised Population Electronic Repository* site, including current location and disciplinary actions.
- “Finding BTK” Investigation Discovery
- When your father is the BTK serial killer, forgiveness is not tidy

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### 10.1 Text

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